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## SOCIAL IDEALS.—II.

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WHAT, however strikes us most in reading this story of New York fashionable life is the lowness of ideals, or, rather, the complete absence of ideals, in the collective existence of these people and even in the life of every one of the characters. An exception is Gerty Farish. Yet throughout she has rather a shadow existence, and is drawn without convincing reality and vitality, more as a type than a living representative of a type, and as a foil to the heroine herself. Even Seldon himself, the one man in the book whom we can like, and whom we do like, and who no doubt comes purified through the *catharsis* of the tragedy which makes him worthy of the love of the heroine when she rises through her suffering—even his ideals are not high. The highest state he can aspire to is one of independence to lead his life; and the most we can say for this life is that it is that of a rather refined amateur who at best confesses that he likes his law work. I must here suggest a comparison between Mrs. Wharton's novel and George Eliot's "Daniel Deronda." They have great points of similarity and instructive points of difference. Gwendolen Harless is presented to us at the beginning very much like Lily Bart. Her "ideals," or, at least her aspirations, make for comfort and elegance, and no more. With her, also, her better nature is awakened and developed through suffering, and she realizes an existence with truer, higher and nobler ideals. But this is effected in that she learns to love Daniel Deronda the Jew; while Lily Bart is raised by her affection for Seldon. But Daniel Deronda the Jew devotes his life to a great idea which to most people appeared a dream:

the uplifting and nationalization of the Jewish people. There was, by the way, no occasion for Mrs. Wharton to obtrude her vulgarly superficial ethnological generalization in attributing the characteristics of the New York financier, Rosendale—which were the outcome of *that* occupation in *those* surroundings—to his racial inheritance. In loving the man, and in suffering through her love, Gwendolen Harless is made to realize, not only in her mind but in her heart and in her whole nature, the reality of a great idea. That such ideas exist, that people live for them, and that they are worth living and dying for, is impressed upon her the more forcibly by the contrast between the man she learns to love and her husband Grancourt, who, in heartless selfishness, follows the thoughtless pursuits and conventions of the fashionable class to which he belongs. Seldon lives for no great idea, no idealism beyond the Epicurean motto “ἔχω οὐκ ἔχομαι,” “I hold and am not held.” Perhaps the difference lies in the social development of England as compared with America. Yet it is hard to believe this of a country that produced the first great modern republic and the abolition of slavery, and now holds countless individuals and families of highest intellectual and moral sanity and refinement. If it be so, we can appreciate the difficulties of the novelist who has such unedifying stuff out of which to form heroes in fiction.

It is this flatness of moral perspective which often pulls us up while reading the book: when we find ourselves moved to deeper emotions of interest and sympathy, and we feel doubtful whether this is true tragedy, whether it can or ought to evoke pity and fear leading to purification, instead of irritation, at most anger, aroused by the absurd contrast between things great and things small—that things so small, illusory and trivial should destroy a thing so great, a human soul. We even doubt at times whether we ought to weep; whether we ought not rather to laugh. I think these doubts are justified; and I should therefore like to modify my statement that “The House of Mirth” is a pure tragedy and call it a tragic satire. There are comic satires and tragic satires. Though in “Don Quixote” our laughter is near to tears, still the dead forces of maleficent chivalry are here laughed to scorn. Yet in Mrs. Wharton’s story, and with Mr. Henry James (the great master of the tragic satire of modern social life), the absurd contrast produces in-

dignation at the tyranny of bad conventions, that are so weak in their flimsy and flaunted pervasiveness, and are none the less productive of tragic results. We experience a reaction after we have found ourselves feeling the life depicted so deeply in spite of its flatness, and we are annoyed that it should have that effect at all, we are even dissatisfied in feeling deeply for the beautiful heroine herself. It is only at the end of the story, when we see her in her suffering, elevated to great heights by it, that she makes herself worthy of deeper feelings in us. Even then we cannot feel convinced that the depth manifested is that of her true nature; from what we knew of her before, we should not feel sure whether the higher level will be maintained thereafter, whether the true reformation has been effected. None of the women in the book, not even Lily, excepting at the end, shows that she is possessed of a heart, still less that she is possessed of true passion. Only when—and this is an extremely delicate and artistic touch of the authoress—the maternal instinct is suggested as Lily dreams of holding the baby in her arms, is there any indication of heart, of unselfish devotion, of passion that makes for great things and for heroism.\* Herein the women of Mr. Henry James are very different. The heroine of "The Golden Bowl"—so similar in her physical qualities and in some of the conditions of her life to Lily Bart, that the two portraits might be placed as *pendants*—is a girl capable of great things, thrilling with a passion which the strong will of the woman holds in control. So also the complex, and somewhat sinister, figure of Kate Croy in the "Wings of the Dove" is placed in supremely effective contrast in every respect to Milly, the pure and gentle yet deeply feeling child of wealth.

Yet we feel that she is a product of the pressure of early want and the longing for financial ease and peace and cleanness. She is, however, a woman with truly deep human feelings, which her strong will controls by the hard and calculating mind of the child of our times and of social financial struggle. This hard calculation drives her near to criminality; yet she is a woman who can love greatly and deeply. She is a splendid

\* Perhaps, herein I am unjust to Mrs. Wharton, the artist. The absence of passion may form part of the drawing of the world and the characters she is depicting. Still, I miss certain touches which would impress upon the reader that blood is coursing in the veins of her women—though it be the blood of the "anæmic."

product of the modern art of fiction. In her, as in many of the women of Mr. Henry James, there is something of Shakespearian calibre. In spite of all change of time and the absolute contrast of social setting, we feel that such women are akin to the characters of Shakespeare; that, with the shifting of the social scene, they could make Lady Macbeths or Juliets or Ophelias. We cannot possibly feel that with any of the women of "The House of Mirth"; though, perhaps, Mrs. Fisher might find her place in a Shakespearian comedy transferred to our own times.\*

\* Even in Mr. Henry James we feel that the exaggerated importance given to "social" considerations acts in a desiccating, devitalizing manner upon his drawing of life and character. After all, is the Prince in "The Golden Bowl" worthy of even the minimum of serious sympathy necessary to make him a principal actor in an almost tragic situation? We are sorry to find the author himself carried away by his artistic self-detachment into social sympathy with the type, until he draws him not without an implied glow of approval or admiration. Is the Prince worthy of any sympathy? He is an idle, unchivalrous *fainéant*—not even a sportsman—barely escaping shabby gentility, though he is copiously bedizened in the faded rags of the mediæval robes of an Italian grandee, just saved by American money from the old-rag-stand on the Piazza della Cancelleria. He idly lives on the money of his American father-in-law, and slavishly fashions his life to follow the very unheroic and selfishly exaggerated, uneventful life of these people of wealth who have removed the centre of universal interest to the relations between a rich father and daughter! Does the moral atmosphere in which the drama is enacted *artistically* (I will not touch upon the specifically moral aspect) "justify" the passion, approaching tragedy so nearly, of the beautiful heroine and her rival? Are not the conceptions which the two women have of the hero and the chivalrous glamour cast about him by the author, as well as the seriousness and intricacy with which the action is depicted, rather *opera-bouffesque*? Can the reader take it all as seriously as the author, with strenuous labor, strives to induce him to take it? We almost feel like exclaiming rudely at the end of the book, "*Tant de bruit pour une omelette*"! Perhaps the whole work is artistically out of proportion, out of drawing, because the whole of life is focussed from the "social" point of view, which does not correspond to real life on a large scale. The author has probably been carried too far by his artistic self-detachment into misleading the reader in his estimate of the values in the picture. Even if we admit that these "social" motives *actually* have such supreme power in the life of a great portion of modern communities (which I have claimed for them in this essay), we require by clear implication, if not by the *ipsissima verba* of the author, to be assured that at least he, the author, recognizes the moral inferiority of all the actors and of their view of life. Then such a work becomes the true and great satire which it almost attains to being. If I am wrong in this point of criticism and Mr. James is artistically justified in thus giving the results of his penetrating and delicate insight into the actual life of the society he chooses to present, I should at least demand for the artistic *form* of such matter that it be presented with a more manifest tone of *persiflage*. And were even this not to be admitted, then I at least claim that the whole work ought to be shorter, lighter, with less elaborate preparation and marshalling of forces for a battle which is really only a social skirmish.

Another general impression we carry away after living in the atmosphere of "The House of Mirth" is that neither the men nor the women (always with the exception of Gerty Farish) have any conception of duty. The Hebraic sense of duty is a negative quantity as regards the inmates of that House of Mirth, and Mrs. Wharton has no doubt meant to show this. From the social point of view this means the duty to our neighbors: Charity and the lighter manifestations of it, in our smaller regards for the simple happiness of those about us. It also means the duty to ourselves: to bring out all the capabilities that are within us. From the highest or religious point of view it concerns our relations to, and our harmony with, the world as a whole, not in its chaotic disjointed multiplicity, but the cosmos, the highest apprehensible form of the infinite, which is most directly suggested to us in art, in harmony, in beauty. But, leaving this highest point of view, which we attain to in moments of deeper contemplation, the sense of duty drives us to do, to act, to accomplish something, which can ultimately be brought into harmony with the higher and more abstract conception of our relation to ourselves, to other human beings and to the world. It is a test which can be applied to the humblest action and make it right or wrong: whether it makes the people about us happier and nobler, whether it adds to the welfare of the community or the nation or humanity as a whole, whether it brings us a little nearer to what we can conceive our perfect self to be. And this applies to the simple note written, to the making of a chair, to the pursuit of abstract research, to industry advanced or commerce extended, or even to hunting hounds as well as they can be hunted. Whatever is thus done as well as we can do it can ultimately be harmonized with our highest religious conception of duty.

This, of course, is the highest, the cosmical or religious foundation of the sense of duty, which it may be difficult to bring into constant and active bearing upon our every-day existence and our every act. We cannot and need not be at all moments conscious of it. If we attempt this, we may neutralize the energy and directness, as well as the spontaneity of our actions, and end by being unproductive dreamers or at least pretentious prigs. But, as such considerations form the groundwork of our sense of duty, so we can, if called upon to do so, test every action

and every feeling by their relation to them, by their harmony with them.

Yet the full realization of such religious and cosmical conceptions of life and thought demands—and herein lies its immediate touch with the actual life of our times—the most perfect knowledge and understanding of the best and the highest achievements and thoughts of our own times. We are modern, Western peoples, neither savage, mediæval nor ancient. We must be properly *educated*. This means that we should take cognizance of, at least possess intellectual sympathy with, the great achievements of the past and of the present day in Science and Art, in Creation, Thought and Action; and, standing on the highest point of our civilization, we should look up with aspiring eyes towards infinity. This, again, demands progress in religious beliefs, as well as in material, intellectual and artistic life. To be the highest and most truly religious man or community, it is necessary to be the most highly educated. A nation, in order to be highly moral, must have a high average of general education. Herein lie the importance, the necessity and the responsibilities of an adequate system of general national education.

Still, we must not forget that there is also a lighter and a more remote aspect and result of the moral foundations to a nation's conduct and manners. It is the directly and immediately social aspect of life, in which the relation between human beings, not in work or competition, nor in productiveness, nor in higher thought or action, is itself the object of central interest and effort. The very nature of this form of social intercourse, being free from labor or interest, is that it should be light and graceful and gracious. Out of this grow the social virtues, and amenities: tact and friendliness, tempered by personal dignity and reserve. It will be found that these again can be led back ultimately to the deeper virtues upon which we have just dwelt, but there is no need for doing this; in fact, it would destroy their graceful spontaneity and artistic brightness to obtrude this relation. There are such specifically social virtues and qualities which can be developed and which ought to find appreciation and reward in their proper sphere and their proper proportion. Yet even these are absent in the House of Mirth—not only in New York, but in most worldly centres. It is upon other, more

specious and fortuitous advantages that the scale of merit and consideration in these spheres is based. The qualities are those that glitter and are taken in mass, selfishly followed and worshipped without any consciousness of, or demand for, nobler qualities. It is disheartening, it is *écœurant*. But if it be a consolation, we must recognize that this absurd contradiction or denial of truly social qualities and their true moral essence existed to a greater or a lesser degree in nearly every period of history.

No doubt the Levites, among the Jews of old, as a class, developed their outwardly manifest life of the streets for the benefit of the admiring mass, until their distinctive dress or tricks of manner and bearing became the objects of admiration and covetousness, killing the spirit of inner worth and real superiority; and the mob of Jerusalem would every day have preferred their station to that of the deepest and greatest of Jewish prophets and reformers. The same applies to the priests and the court officials of the Pharaohs in Egypt. Even in the most ancient days of China we have such evidence. From the sayings of Confucius we learn that "a man of the village of Ta-hiang said: 'Great indeed is the philosopher K'ung. His learning is extensive, and yet he does not render his name famous in anything.' The Master heard the observation and said to his disciples: 'What shall I take up? Shall I take up charioteering, or shall I take up archery? - I will take up charioteering!'" In ancient Greece, even in the golden age of Athenian supremacy, the false god of the vulgar market-place held his specious reign. The Athenian public, we may feel sure, valued more highly the fashionable Alcibiades than they did his master Socrates, or Plato, or Pheidias or Sophocles. The dreams of Pheidippides, at the beginning of the "Clouds" of Aristophanes are those of any member of the *jeunesse dorée* in our days. The attribute *εὐπάρυφος* (well dressed) still was the highest ambition of those in Athens who correspond to the readers of society papers with us. In Rome, the brainless patrician youth who wore his toga in the approved style (though it is wholly right that he should do so and should have approbation in *due* proportion for so doing) stood higher in the estimation of the multitude than Virgil or Horace, Cicero or Livy. The satires of Juvenal lay bare the social decease of Rome in this respect.



In the Middle Ages, of course, chivalry and class restrictions had actual grounds in life to give more substance to outer distinction. Dante's position in his own lifetime was far from that of the men whose names he rescued from oblivion. The same applies to the golden age of Shakespeare, the whole of the Elizabethan period. But even after the French Revolution broke down feudal barriers, the Directoire soon produced the "man about town" and a *beau monde* of its own.

Recognizing how adventitious are these social estimates, especially when we have past history before us and can thus see human values in their true perspective and harmonious relation, how they are bound to ephemeral and local traditions and prejudices, we must be struck with the fact that their influence should have been so powerful and universal. On the one hand we realize that they are bound down to a definite local environment in a definite period. We cannot admit for ourselves the validity of past standards in other places, which raise an ordinary wealthy Athenian and Florentine, whose names are forgotten, above Plato and Dante. We also realize that in every period they are most potent with those who have not travelled in body or in mind, who know not other peoples and countries, and who have not travelled in thought over the vast tracts of man's past and man's spiritual kingdom of art and science. On the other hand, we must be struck by their persistent sway in the past and their power and influence in the present. To recognize the reason for this we must go deeper into the origin and essence of this "social" estimate, and we shall find that their strength lies in that they arise out of elements in man's nature which are fundamental to human life and in so far are justifiable.

After man had developed beyond the savage, prehistoric stage, when fight for possession meant security of life, the satisfying of hunger and of the elementary instincts, he rose higher until the moral laws were more and more established and recognized in their universal validity. Besides the religious and inner foundation of these laws upon which we dwelt above, as a ζῶον πολιτικόν, a social being, he naturally, as such, craves for love, admiration, approval; and he craves for power because it engenders and commands these. According to the forces of natural or "unnatural" selection in human society, it also wins woman. As regards the community as a whole, this "power,"

which commands admiration and approval and attracts love, is identified with the qualities which the community needs most for its preservation and advancement, according to the ruling consciousness of the people in that stage of its civilization. In early theocratic states or among savages, where everything, even things most material, are directly under the influence of divine or mysterious supranatural powers, descent from god or hero constitutes the highest human power and hence prestige. This is soon transferred to the caste of priests, where a more definite theocratic government is organized. When circumstances have made the community above all things warlike, physical strength and all that this means in outer appearance and bearing, suggesting skill at arms, courage, power of leading, constitute the claim to social prestige. Wealth soon comes in to enforce, if not to replace, these qualities, when it is found to give the power of procuring good arms, offensive and defensive, which the poorer people cannot procure, and the erection of fortified dwellings and castles which give security and baffle the foe. With higher political civilization the powers which go to the making of a statesman are recognized as of greatest advantage to the community. In free cities and commercial centres, the long and old standing of integrity, commanding universal faith and credit, come to confer the highest prestige—on those connected with such commerce. Nay, in such civic organizations, the heads and leading members of guilds of trade and craft receive their due prominence. When, finally, the rudimentary forms of life have been provided for and civilization as such, in contradistinction to more barbarous and savage life, is recognized as a force in itself, the highest and most distinctive manifestations of such civilization in intellectual and artistic attainments—humanities—become a chief badge of distinction. The would-be lover in Rostand's play has to call in the help of Cyrano to appeal to the lady he wishes to win, and her standards are laid down by the "precious" court of the *hôtel* Rambouillet.

All these standards of social recognition and esteem are based upon actual and fundamental qualities conducive to the advancement and welfare of the community. Very soon, at an early stage, however, these qualities, subtle as regards their immediate recognition by the stranger or the mass of the people, are classified. The outer characteristics as such become devel-

oped and defined, and lead to a general and grosser social classification, and, with the tendency to cling to those once associated with their possession, they become fixed and stereotyped, thereby losing their moral and spiritual vitality and meaning. At last the outer characteristics, or mere symbols of the underlying qualities, become dominant. And when then the life of a community becomes too wide to search for and test the presence of the inner qualities, mere outer manners or customs, outward appearances and casual association by birth or physical proximity take their place. The individual is submerged in the class or caste, and the class in the stereotyped symbolism of attributes which take the place of the essence. And this does not only apply to the weightier moral qualities, but to the lighter graces of refined society.

Still more noticeable and noteworthy is the historical process—amounting almost to an historical “law”—that the needs of the community, which led to “power,” have developed further or changed in condition, while the emblems of power in social classes and for individuals have remained. This is the universal symptom of social disease from which communities occasionally suffer and which undermines their very life, appearing in more virulent or acute forms or in slow and insidious chronic paralysis. It is then that such power, instead of being social—as by its origin it was—becomes unsocial, a solvent of healthy society, a disintegrating force in national life. It is from such a disease that we are suffering now, when our Houses of Mirth are setting the tone of our social life.

The remedy is to be sought from within, and from without in the action of public opinion itself, and those who rule, and are directly responsible for, the life of the community. These are the Church, the State and the heads of state. It is hopeless to look to the press for help in such matters; its avowed function is to cater for, not to lead, public opinion. But all those who are in any way capable of influencing public opinion, directly or indirectly, and every right-minded individual, however humble (since, after all, he forms an integral part of this public), can do much by ignoring the false gods and by worshipping the true One in every act of his life: by never in any way admitting the false standards, and by acting up to the true ones in the estimate of our fellow men and in our dealings with

them; by the repudiation of all public acts and pronouncements which confirm or establish false social values, and by the scrupulous and active discouragement of all literature, journalistic or otherwise, which caters to these low social idolatries.

But herein we have a right to look to the leaders of thought and of action for guidance and support. The rulers of religion and the rulers of state here have a sphere of gravest responsibility. It cannot be the only domain of the Church to discuss and confirm dogmas and to insist upon their universal acceptance. Of all bodies it has the high vocation of watching over man's relation to his ideals, his ideal world. And it is the Church which must establish this harmony between man's life and man's ideals; not only in demanding that life should conform to ideals, but also—and perhaps even more so—that ideals should harmonize with life and respond to the growth, expansion and elevation of this life in the progress of man's history.

As the managers of newspapers may smile with patronizing dissent when it is suggested that it is one of their chief functions to educate and elevate public opinion, so the practical politician would consider with benevolent scepticism the assertion that it is one of his chief functions not to follow, but to lead, the public; and not to lead only in questions of fiscal or foreign policy; in matters of security of property, and in the mechanism of representative government, but in seeing that all these functions culminate beyond national wealth and security, in the raising of national ideals affecting the social life of the community.

The diseased periods of history are chiefly those in which the leaders of religion and the leaders of politics have lagged behind in presenting the people with national ideals responding to the life of the times. In fact, progress in history may be recognized in the degree of readiness and directness with which the ideals have been advanced as the new needs have grown up. The truly great men in history have been those who have accomplished this. They are the true world reformers; though, like Erasmus and the Humanists, they may in their own time have appeared to be conservatives. The religions of the day have been wanting in that they still concern themselves too exclusively with the inner spiritual salvation of individual man, the echo of the monastic ideal, and in that they have not developed their conceptions of desirable life and its laws with the development

of civilized society. The material prosperity of our times, the growth of commerce and industry, the increase and distribution of wealth have been recognized by the State as great forces in modern times. It is right that the State should encourage commercial expansion, it is right that the State should give its seal of approbation to those who thus advance commercial and industrial life, and thereby confer social distinction upon them. But there are developments in this material growth of our commercialism which the moral consciousness of the people recognize as evil. The mere manipulation of other people's capital in finance, the doubtful practices to which it leads, the demoralizing effect upon him who rapidly gains great wealth by those means and upon the community at large, by the example it gives and the ambitions it stimulates,—these are elements which it is the duty of the State to counteract. The seal of public recognition, which does, and ought to, confer social prestige, should be withheld from those who rapidly acquire great wealth by the skilful manipulation of capital; while the inaugurators of new departures in true industry and commerce, who benefit and elevate their employees by considerations beyond the mere immediate acquisition of wealth, while increasing the prosperity of the nation by their useful productiveness—they are to receive the stamp of national approbation, together with the leaders of thought, the leaders of mind and the creators of things beautiful.

And if the statesmen fail in this, then we must look to the heads of state, whose vocation it has ever been, and will be, to influence directly the social life, the social tone, of the nation. Whether kings or presidents, it remains with them, by their encouragement and by their example, to strike the right keynote, so that the symphony of social forces should ring true in harmonious order, and not false in the dissonance of worldly ambitions run riot. President Roosevelt, in his arduous efforts, by fighting the demoralizing influences of monopolies, has set his face against the forces which make for the vitiation of American social life. Should he be victorious, he will not only confer a blessing upon the community and the nation in counteracting economic evils, but in shattering to its foundations the gaudy and truly vicious structure of the American House of Mirth.

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